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As the United States moves from being a predominantly biracial to a multiracial society, racial attitudes continue to become more diverse and more complex. Scholars need to address these changes not only in terms of black and white Americans, but also how these changes involve and affect other racial groups, particularly Asian and Hispanic Americans. This inquiry looks at some of these complexities by examining how social construction differentials in the minds of white Americans affect their attitudes toward the issues of equal opportunity and multiculturalism. The analysis shows that differences in the cognitive images whites hold of minority groups in comparison to their own race have a significant impact in determining white attitudes toward group-based issues. In effect, negative constructions of racial groups lower one's support for policies aimed at these groups.

No issue has more dramatically shaped the social and political landscape of the United States than the issue of race. As Edsall and Edsall (1991, 5) report: "Race has crystalized and provided a focus for values conflicts, for cultural conflicts, and for interest conflicts." Nearly all of the research regarding racial attitudes has focused, for good reason, on the divisions between white and black Americans. However, the rapidly growing number of Asian and Hispanic immigrants to the United States since the 1970s has produced new complexities and tensions in American society. By the year 2000, according to Census Bureau projections, more than one quarter of the American population will be nonwhite (Frolik 1988). This growing racial and ethnic diversity has served to underscore the need for a better understanding of the nature and development of racial attitudes among white Americans.

In this research, data from a national survey are used to assess how the views of white Americans on race-related policy issues are affected by their more general orientation toward the groups on which these policies are likely to have the greatest impact. The concept of "social construction," as developed by Schneider and

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Ingram (1993), is applied to the development of racial attitudes among whites. Social construction refers to the normative and evaluative images individuals hold concerning definable groups, such as the poor, the elderly, and racial minorities, whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy. These attitudes, it is hypothesized, help to shape an individual's opinions toward social issues, especially issues dealing with race. Of particular importance is what we term the *social construction differential*, that is, the difference between how whites view their own race as a group and how they view different minority groups in society (such as blacks, Asians, and Hispanics). The hypothesis is that the larger this differential, the less likely an individual will be to hold favorable views toward policies or ideas beneficial to minorities.

The analysis presented here examines the factors which contribute to social construction differentials of white Americans regarding views toward black Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans, and how, in turn, these images affect white attitudes toward the issues of equal opportunity and multiculturalism. The findings indicate that social construction differentials have a significant impact in determining white attitudes on these issues—an impact independent of political orientation, socioeconomic status, and demographic characteristics.

Racial Attitudes in America

Since the 1940s, changes in the social and economic conditions of black Americans have been accompanied by changes in the attitudes of white Americans toward race-related issues. Studies published in *Scientific American* in the 1970s reported that overt forms of segregation and opposition to the ideas of racial equality no longer characterized the attitudes of most white Americans toward racial issues (Greeley and Sheatsley 1971; Taylor, Sheatsley, and Greeley 1978). These researchers reported that white attitudes were moving slowly, yet steadily in an egalitarian and integrationist direction.

Other scholars claim, however, that white racism has not disappeared, but rather has been transformed into more "symbolic" forms of expression (McConahay and Hough 1976; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; McConahay 1986; and Sears 1988). These authors argue that prejudiced or racist attitudes are acquired by whites during their preadult years and that these attitudes persist into adulthood. Shifts in cultural norms in recent decades have produced, however, a climate in which overt support for segregation or discrimination is no longer viewed as an acceptable form of expression. Instead, such attitudes are couched in more "symbolic" terms, such as opposition to busing or to preferential treatment for blacks. Symbolic stances, therefore, have become a way of expressing general antiblack attitudes in terms that seem culturally appropriate. Moreover, symbolic racism is thought to have less to do with the defense of personal interests (such as having a child who may be bused or fear of losing a job due to affirmative action mandates) than it does with attitudes having little to do with specific personal interests (Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979).

These antiblack attitudes, suggest Kinder and Sears (1981, 416), result from the perception, by whites, that "blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline" (see also, McConahay and Hough 1976; McConahay 1986).

The claim that symbolic racism results from a synthesis of antiblack affect and traditional values, however, has recently been challenged. Several authors have taken issue with the assertion that racial attitudes are somehow detached from personal interests or feelings of threat (see Bobo 1988; Glaser 1994). Proponents of the "group conflict" theory of racial attitudes argue that perceptions of personal threat or group conflict are the causal mechanisms driving white racial attitudes today. Viewing racial attitudes as more than simply expressions of positive or negative affect toward members of other groups, these scholars contend that racial attitudes result from a zero-sum view of politics; that is, there is a growing tendency to "think in group terms, in 'us' and 'them' terms, and that they see the possibility that their own group could lose something valued to a rival group" (Glaser 1994, 23). For "group conflict" theorists, racial attitudes have a basis in real or perceived threat by the dominant (white) group regarding the actions of a subordinate (minority) group.

There is evidence to suggest, therefore, that symbolic racism considerations as well as elements of group conflict contribute to the development of attitudes toward blacks and other minority groups. Both symbolic and interest group concerns are evident in the perception of social groups.

A Social Construction Approach

The work of Schneider and Ingram (1993) may provide clues to solving the puzzle of racial attitudes. They present a powerful case for the need to understand how social stereotypes or (more formally) the social construction of groups in society affect political attitudes and behaviors. Although their work was concerned primarily with how social construction affects the actions of policy-making elites, they emphasize that their theory is generalizable to a range of phenomena such as agenda setting, policy alternative selection, legislative responsiveness, as well as citizen participation and the formation of public attitudes. The authors describe social constructions as the "cultural characterizations" or "popular images" that serve to define certain groups in society. As Schneider and Ingram (1993) explain:

> The social construction of a target population refers to (1) the recognition of the shared characteristics that distinguish a target population as socially meaningful, and (2) the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics. (335)

These normative and evaluative judgments, they state, tend to produce positive or negative characterizations of groups, with some traits such as "intelligent," "hard-working," and "peaceful" producing positive images and others such as "stupid," "lazy," and "violent" producing negative images. Social constructions are significant in the development of public policy in that they produce pressures for public

officials to provide benefits for groups that are positively constructed and to penalize those that are negatively perceived.

The importance of social constructions or cognitive images to the formation and maintenance of public attitudes has been noted by a number of social scientists (see for example, Edelman 1964; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Kinder and Sanders 1990; and Zaller 1992). Zaller (1992) argues that:

> Stereotypes and frames [of reference] . . . are important to the process by which the public keeps informed because they determine what the public thinks it is becoming informed about, which in turn often determines how people take sides on political issues. (8)

The concept of social construction, however, is more complex than that of simple stereotypes. Stereotypes tend to be loosely held images highly susceptible to change given new information about the target of the stereotype. Social constructions, by contrast, involve clusters of cognitive images about a target group—images or attitudes that tend to reinforce each other, thereby making the social construction more resistant to change. The stronger or more firmly held the social construction, the more resistant this set of attitudes will be to new information. It is this attitudinal resilience which makes understanding social constructions an important part of evaluating racial attitudes. This view of social constructions is consistent with a growing literature on social cognition and social psychology (see, for instance, Fiske and Taylor 1991; Kinder 1983; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987).

The social construction of groups is viewed as being both culturally driven and elite supported (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Over the years, research into white attitudes toward racial groups has yielded a number of findings that shed light on the factors that might influence white social construction of different racial groups. Carmines and Stimson (1989) found that since 1964 racial issues have been particularly partisan and serve as central elements in the definition of liberal/conservative political beliefs today. There is, however, some evidence which suggests that the effects of ideology do not extend to the types of attitudes that define "symbolic racism" (Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, and Kendrick 1991). A number of studies have also discussed the importance of education (Jackman 1978; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Bobo and Licari 1989; Zaller 1992) and age (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985) in the development of racial attitudes, with younger and more educated whites tending to view racial groups more positively. Jackman (1978) and Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) provide a word of caution concerning the impact of education, however, noting that these effects are more important in defining attitudes toward broad principles such as racial equality, than to issues of implementation such as support for school busing. Historically, regional differences have also defined racial attitudes, with people living in the South tending to hold less favorable views toward minorities and racial issues (Black and Black 1987).

Using Social Construction to Understand Racial Attitudes

In joining the debate on white racial attitudes in the United States, we borrow conceptually from Schneider and Ingram (1993). As they note, social constructions

of target populations are created by a number of factors, such as culture, socialization, history, literature, and the media. While the perception of target populations varies across individuals, the overall social construction of such target groups and the extent to which social constructions are shared and change over time are matters for empirical analysis (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 335). The growth of Asian and Hispanic populations in the United States has increased the salience of these target populations. Identifying the social construction of these groups and how these constructions coincide with and differ from that of blacks provides a more complete understanding of racial attitudes.

The focus of this research is the effect of social constructions of racial groups on the attitudes of white respondents concerning group-based issues, particularly equal opportunity and multiculturalism. The concept of a *social construction differential* is used here to refer to the difference (or differential) between white views of their own race and the views they hold of particular minority groups. What becomes important, therefore, is not whether white respondents hold positive or negative views of particular minority groups, but rather the difference between how they cognitively construct these groups in relation to how they construct their own racial group. In other words, whites may hold positive or negative images of their own race just as they may hold positive or negative images of racial minorities. What is important is the *difference* in these evaluations—differences which oftentimes tend to reflect more negative social construction of minority groups in relation to one's own racial group. The central hypothesis is that the greater the social construction differential, the less likely a person will be to evaluate positively policies or ideas which might have their greatest impact on these minority groups.

How do social construction differentials develop? As Sears, Hensler, and Speer (1979) suggest, attitudes toward racial groups are most likely to develop early in life and persist into adulthood. The primary influences on social construction, therefore, are expected to be more social than political in origin. If such is the case, social construction differentials can be viewed as long-term forces affecting racial attitudes.

A model of racial attitudes that incorporates the concept of social construction differential is needed for several reasons. First, despite the large body of research concerning attitudes toward racial groups or issues related to race, few works have attempted to integrate views of racial groups into a model explaining attitudes toward broader racial issues. Those that have addressed this linkage (for instance, Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985) have relied primarily upon "feeling thermometers" of the sort used in the American National Election Studies. In their most common form, respondents are asked to indicate on a 100-point scale how "warm" or "cold" they feel toward particular groups. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) find some evidence that "warmer" thermometer ratings are linked to certain issue attitudes, such as favoring federal school intervention to hasten school integration. They conclude from the lack of temporal change in the thermometer ratings, however, that whites respond over time to issues of race in terms of the *policy content* of

the issues and not in terms of their overall feelings toward blacks.[1] The research presented here challenges this notion, asserting that images of minority groups are important for understanding broader racial attitudes.

A second contribution of this research is that it examines not only the views of white Americans toward blacks in the United States but also their views toward Hispanic and Asian Americans. The ever increasing numbers of Hispanic and Asian immigrants to the United States and their influence on American life and culture are producing changes in the American political and social system that demand the attention of political scholars (see Leege, Lieske, and Wald 1991; and Ramirez 1988). The analysis provided here represents a start in this direction, examining how white attitudes toward Hispanic and Asian Americans affect their attitudes toward group-based policy issues.

Finally, this inquiry looks at the impact of social construction on attitudes toward group-based issues, namely equal opportunity and multiculturalism. These issues, by their nature, both involve the amelioration of differences between groups (particularly racial groups) in American society. They do so, however, from very different philosophical bases. On one hand, equal opportunity is rooted in conceptions of *individualism*, emphasizing the similarity or lack of inherent difference among members of different groups. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, reflects support for racial *group equality* and the preservation of differences among groups.[2] Thus, contrasting the attitudinal bases of equal opportunity and multiculturalism is a significant endeavor in its own right.

In addressing these issues, the factors that contribute to differences in the social construction of whites and minority racial groups (blacks, Asians, and Hispanics) by whites are analyzed. In particular, we examine how socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics affect the development of social construction differentials. Next, analysis of how social construction differentials affect white support for the issues of equal opportunity and multiculturalism are presented. Finally, the

[1]Feeling thermometers, however, provide only the grossest measures of how individuals view different groups. As Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) themselves point out: "It is not entirely clear what a question like this measures, since it does not deal with any issue and does not seem to vary with external events . . ." (120). Feeling thermometers have also been shown to exacerbate the tendency of some respondents to respond to political objects in a consistently positive or consistently negative way (Wilcox, Sigelman, and Cook 1989).

An alternative approach, employed here, is to ask respondents to evaluate a series of specific traits or characteristics concerning the groups in question. These items can then be scaled to produce attitudinal measures based on specific group referents.

[2]Merelman (1994) notes that "multiculturalism" is not yet a fully developed or agreed upon concept in the academic vernacular; rather, the term is used in a variety of contexts to denote "different tendencies" in the relationships between racial and ethnic groups. Some use the term narrowly to refer to particular group-related policies, such as educational policies which seek to promote understanding and equality in the teaching of different cultures and values. We employ a broader definition of multiculturalism, referring instead to the possible effects and consequences of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States (see Merelman 1994 for a more detailed discussion of the concept of multiculturalism).

findings are discussed within the broader context of how diverse groups function together within society.

Model and Data

The research presented in this inquiry is driven by two fundamental questions: (1) What factors contribute to the development of social construction differentials among white Americans?; and (2) What impact do these differentials have on group-based issue attitudes, particularly views toward equal opportunity and multiculturalism in the United States?

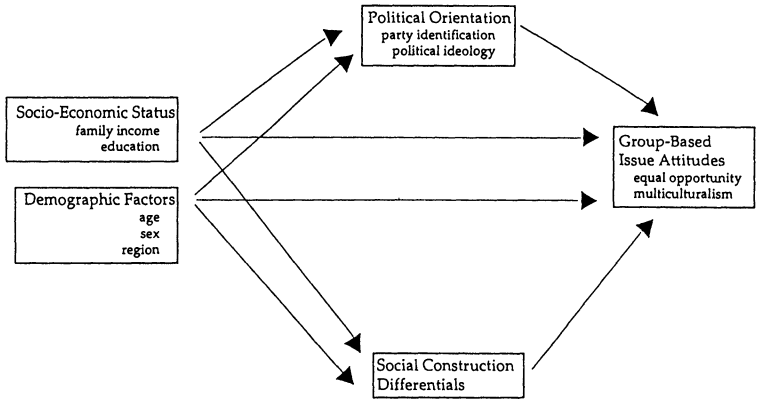
As shown in figure 1, social construction differentials among whites are expected to result from the impact of two basic sets of variables: demographic characteristics (sex, age, and region) and socioeconomic status (family income and education level). In turn, attitudes toward equal opportunity and multiculturalism are thought to be affected by differences in social construction as well as more traditional sources of policy attitude formation (i.e., political orientation, socioeconomic status, and background characteristics).

Operationalization

The data for this analysis are drawn from the 1992 CPS National Election Study. The endogenous variables involving the social construction of racial groups (whites, blacks, Asians, and Hispanics) are summated rating scales constructed from three items, each of which employed a seven-point format. Respondents were asked in turn if they thought whites, blacks, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans were lazy or hard-working, unintelligent or intelligent, violent or peaceful (see Appendix for the complete wording of the items used in this analysis). The

Figure 1

Development of Group-Based Issue Attitudes



resulting scales range from zero (totally negative view of the group) to 18 (totally positive view of the group).[3] Finally, three social construction differential scales were computed by subtracting individual scores on each minority scale from scores on the white scale for each respondent. Thus, increasingly positive scores on these scales indicate a greater differential—or sense of difference—with respect to each minority group.[4]

Scales for the endogenous variables tapping group-based issue attitudes were also constructed from a series of items. Attitudes toward equal opportunity were measured through six questions, each utilizing a standard five-point agree/disagree scale (Feldman 1988). The equal opportunity scale ranges from zero for individuals taking the most conservative stances toward equal opportunity to 24 for respondents taking the most liberal stances on this issue. Similarly, the multiculturalism scale involves the use of six, four-point items (*extremely likely* to *not at all likely*), which ask respondents about the possible effects of larger populations of Hispanics and Asians living in the United States. The multiculturalism scale ranges from zero for those taking the most conservative stand toward the effects of cultural diversity to 18 for those taking the most liberal stand.[5]

Turning to the other variables in the analysis, party identification and political ideology are measured by the standard seven-point scales, with "strong Republican" and "extremely conservative" positions at the low-end of the scale and "strong Democrat" and "extremely liberal" positions at the high end of each respective scale. Family income is determined using the 24 category scheme employed by the CPS. Education is based on years of formal schooling reported by each respondent, with zero indicating no formal schooling and 17 indicating graduate study or more education. Age denotes the respondent's age in years. The region variables are based on the four geographic regions used by CPS for sample selection (see Appendix for a breakdown of these regions).

Social Construction of Racial Groups

Table 1 provides the social construction scores for whites, Asians, Hispanics, and blacks. As these data show, whites have the most positive construction of their

[3]Reliability scores for each of these scales using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951) are: whites = 0.62, blacks = 0.66, Asian Americans = 0.63, and Hispanic Americans = 0.60.

[4]As one reviewer has noted, the utility of the concept of social differential is in part dependent upon its ability to show greater explanatory power than evaluations of outgroups alone. To examine this, the regression analyses presented here were conducted with variables for the social construction of Asians, Hispanics and blacks substituted for the social construction *differential* variables for these groups. In each case, the bivariate correlations of the social construction differential variables and the dependent variables were greater than those for the corresponding social construction variable and the overall explanatory power of the model using the differential variables was greater.

[5]Reliability scores for these scales using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951) are: equal opportunity = 0.71 and multiculturalism = 0.77.

TABLE 1

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION RACIAL GROUP SCORES
(WHITE RESPONDENTS ONLY)

	Mean Score	*N*
Whites	11.8	1,784
Asians	10.9***	1,639
Hispanics	9.0***	1,678
Blacks	8.4***	1,767

Scores can range from 0 to 18. Significance of difference between mean score for racial group and that for whites based on two-tailed *t*-test. All differences are significant at the .001 level.

own group, with social construction scores for Asians, Hispanics, and blacks each significantly lower than that for whites. Since the maximum score on this scale is 18, it is evident that whites generally have a positive view of their group. Whites' constructions of different racial groups not only are less positive but also show differentiation across groups, with Asians the next most positively constructed group and blacks least positively constructed.

The model of influences on the social construction of racial groups is defined in the following equation:

$$SCDiff_{ij} = b_{0,i} + b_{1,i}Inc_j + b_{2,i}Ed_j + b_{3,i}Age_j + b_{4,i}Sex_j + b_{5,i}SO_j + b_{6,i}MW_j + b_{7,i}We_j + e_{i,j} \quad (1)$$

In this equation, $SCDiff_{i,j}$ is individual j's view of racial group i subtracted from his or her view of whites; Inc_j and Ed_j measure the respondent's family income and education respectively, while Age_j indicates the individual's age. The final four variables in the equation are dichotomies. Sex_j is one for females and zero for males. Similarly, respondents living in the South (SO_j) or Midwest (MW_j) or West (We_j) were coded as one, while those not living in these respective areas were coded zero. The Northeast serves as the reference category for the region variables. The $b_{0,i}$ through $b_{7,i}$ are regression coefficients which are estimated separately for each racial group.

Group-Based Issue Attitudes

The model of factors thought to affect group-based issue attitudes is defined in the following equation:

$$Iss_{ij} = b_{0,i} + b_{1,i}Inc_j + b_{2,i}Ed_j + b_{3,i}Age_j + b_{4,i}Sex_j + b_{5,i}SO_j + b_{6,i}MW_j + b_{7,i}We_j + b_{8,i}Pty_j + b_{9,i}Id_j + b_{10,i}WhBlk_j + b_{11,i}WhAs_j + b_{12,i}WhHis_j + e_{i,j} \quad (2)$$

Iss_{ij} represents individual j's attitude toward issue i (equal opportunity or multiculturalism); Pty_j is j's political party identification; Id_j is j's political ideology;

$WhBlk_j$, $WhAs_j$, and $WhHis_j$ tap the differences in respondent j's views of whites from j's views of black Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans. All other variables are identical to those outlined above in equation (1).

RESULTS

Social Construction of Racial Groups

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis of the attitudes of white respondents in the social construction of racial groups. The entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients obtained by estimating equation (1) for white attitudes toward three racial groups (black, Asian, and Hispanic Americans) in comparison to attitudes toward white Americans.

In examining white attitudes toward different racial groups, several patterns stand out. First is the importance of education in determining the social construction differential for each racial group. The effects of education are strong in each case, particularly with regard to white attitudes toward Asian Americans. The negative sign of the coefficients indicates that individuals with lower levels of

TABLE 2

DETERMINANTS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD RACIAL GROUPS (WHITE RESPONDENTS ONLY)

	Difference in Attitudes Toward Blacks	Difference in Attitudes Toward Asians	Difference in Attitudes Toward Hispanics
Socioeconomic status			
Family income	.03	−.02	.02
Education	−.17***	−.28***	−.17***
Demographic factors			
Age	.13***	.08***	.11***
Sex (women)	.00	.04	.04
South	.06*	.03	−.01
Midwest	.03	.07*	.02
West	−.06*	−.06*	−.08*
N	1,351	1,280	1,300

Table entries are standardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients obtained by estimating equation (1). Significance tests are based on unstandardized coefficients.

*Significant at .05 level (two-tailed test); **significant at .01 level (two-tailed test); ***significant at .001 level (two-tailed test).

education tend to view these racial groups less favorably in comparison to their own race than do white respondents with higher levels of education; that is, those with lower levels of education tended to characterize whites as more "hard-working," "intelligent," and "peaceful" than blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. These findings accord well with those of other researchers who have reported that education is an important factor in determining attitudes toward racial groups (see Jackman 1978; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Bobo and Licari 1989).

Following education, age is the next most important variable influencing how respondents view whites in comparison to other racial groups. Older respondents tended to have a less positive view of racial minorities in comparison to whites than do younger respondents—a finding consistent with those reported by Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985).

Regional differences in whites' racial attitudes were also evident. As might be predicted from the historical relationship between blacks and whites in the South, southern whites tended to view blacks more negatively in comparison to whites. Living in the South did not have a significant effect on the social construction of Asians and Hispanics. Differences in the construction of blacks, Asians, and Hispanics were smaller among those living in the West, while white Midwesterners exhibited a larger differential in their construction of Asians. Overall, education and age appear to be the strongest influences guiding white attitudes toward all three groups examined, with region having a selective influence on the social construction of white attitudes toward different racial groups.

White Attitudes toward Group-Based Issue Attitudes

Having examined the factors that help determine the social construction of racial groups by whites, we now focus on how these views can help us understand white attitudes toward equal opportunity and multiculturalism. As was shown in Figure 1, attitudes toward group-based issue items such as equal opportunity and multiculturalism are theorized to result not only from political orientations, socioeconomic status, and relevant background characteristics, but also from how the target groups involved in these issues are perceived compared with white perceptions of their own race.[6] To examine these linkages, path models were estimated based on equation 1 and equation 2 for both equal opportunity (table 3) and multiculturalism (table 4).

Equal Opportunity

Table 3 presents standardized OLS regression coefficients, which denote the direct, indirect, and total effects of the independent variables on white attitudes

[6]It should be recognized that this figure somewhat oversimplifies the development of attitudes toward equal opportunity and multiculturalism in that such attitudes can develop simultaneously with constructions of racial groups and political orientations.

TABLE 3

DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD EQUAL OPPORTUNITY (WHITE RESPONDENTS ONLY)

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Socioeconomic status			
Family income	−.09***	−.05	−.14
Education	.07**	.07	.14
Demographic factors			
Age	−.12***	−.05	−.17
Sex (women)	.05*	.03	.08
South	−.06	−.05	−.11
Midwest	.01	−.06	−.05
West	−.01	−.01	−.02
Political orientation			
Party identification	.20***	—	.20
Political ideology	.26***	—	.26
Racial group attitudes			
Blacks	−.13**	—	−.13
Asians	−.04	—	−.04
Hispanics	−.06	—	−.06
N			1,255

Table entries are standardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients obtained by estimating equations (1) and (2).

Significance tests for direct effects are based on unstandardized coefficients.

*Significant at .05 level (two-tailed test); **significant at .01 level (two-tailed test); ***significant at .001 level (two-tailed test).

toward equal opportunity. As these data illustrate, attitudes toward equal opportunity are strongly influenced by an individual's political orientation. Both political ideology and party identification have strong direct and total effects on attitudes in this issue area. Those identifying themselves as liberals and expressing attachment to the Democratic party tended to hold more favorable views toward the idea of equal opportunity in society than did those identifying themselves as conservatives and/or Republicans.

The effects of socioeconomic status on attitudes toward equal opportunity are intriguing in that the impact of education and family income are in opposite directions. Those reporting higher family incomes were less supportive of equal opportunity than those with lower family incomes. Conversely, education has a positive impact on attitudes toward equal opportunity. Those with higher levels of

education viewed equal opportunity more favorably than those with less education. Nearly half of the impact of education, however, is indirect, being mediated through its effects on an individual's social construction of racial groups and to some degree political orientation.

In terms of demographic characteristics, both age and sex have a significant impact. Equal opportunity has more support among younger whites than older ones. Not surprisingly, women—who are often the target group in equal opportunity disputes—tended to have a more favorable view of equal opportunity than did men.

Finally, the social construction of racial groups also has a significant effect, particularly white attitudes toward black Americans. Individuals who perceived greater differences between whites and blacks tended to be less supportive of the need for equal opportunity in the United States. Perceived differences between whites and both Asian and Hispanic Americans had little impact, however, on attitudes toward equal opportunity. Overall, the effects of social construction are roughly equivalent to those associated with socioeconomic status and age, but somewhat less than those associated with political orientation.

Multiculturalism

The direct, indirect, and total effects of political orientation, socioeconomic status, demographic factors, and racial group attitudes on attitudes toward the effects of growing racial diversity or multiculturalism in the United States are shown in table 4. As the data show, the social construction of groups has a strong effect on white perceptions of the effects of multiculturalism. How whites view Hispanic Americans in relation to their own race has the strongest direct effect. The greater difference a respondent perceives between racial minorities and white Americans, the less positive will be that person's attitude toward multiculturalism. Conversely, whites who perceive little difference between whites and black, Asian, and especially Hispanic Americans tended to have more positive views about the effects of racial diversity in the United States.

In terms of socioeconomic status, education also has a strong, positive effect on views toward this issue. More than one third of these effects, however, are indirect, resulting from education's impact on the social construction of racial groups and the development of a respondent's political orientation. While age has a significant positive effect on attitudes toward multiculturalism, these effects are tempered by the variable's indirect effects via social construction. Views toward multiculturalism are significantly different, however, across different regions of the country. Respondents living in the South, Midwest, and West were significantly less positive in their views of the effects of growing racial diversity in the United States than were individuals living in the Northeast. Finally, although political ideology is shown to be significantly related to white attitudes toward multiculturalism, the impact of political orientation in general is marginal compared with other factors.

TABLE 4

DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD MULTICULTURALISM (WHITE RESPONDENTS ONLY)

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Socioeconomic status			
Family income	−.02	−.01	−.03
Education	.17***	.09	.26
Demographic factors			
Age	.10***	−.05	.05
Sex (women)	−.03	−.01	−.04
South	−.11***	−.02	−.13
Midwest	−.09**	−.03	−.12
West	−.14***	.03	−.11
Political orientation			
Party identification	.01	—	.01
Political ideology	.08**	—	.08
Racial group attitudes			
Blacks	−.10*	—	−.10
Asians	−.12***	—	−.12
Hispanics	−.21***	—	−.21
N			1,214

Table entries are standardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients obtained by estimating equations (1) and (2).

Significance tests for direct effects are based on unstandardized coefficients.

*Significant at .05 level (two-tailed test); **significant at .01 level (two-tailed test); ***significant at .001 level (two-tailed test).

In sum, the social construction of groups is shown to be an important determinant of white attitudes toward equal opportunity and multiculturalism in the United States. While political orientation is the key factor guiding views toward equal opportunity in society, the social construction of racial groups (particularly of whites and blacks) is shown to have an impact on par with socioeconomic status and age effects. In terms of attitudes toward multiculturalism, however, the effects of social construction are even more dramatic. Not only do racial attitudes have significant direct effects, but a large percentage of the effects of education are filtered through attitudes of social construction.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As the United States moves from being a predominantly biracial to a multiracial society, race relations, racial issues, and racial attitudes continue to become more

diverse and more complex. Scholars need to address these changes not only in terms of black and white Americans, but also how these changes involve and affect other racial groups, particularly Asian and Hispanic Americans. This inquiry has attempted to address some of these complexities by examining how social construction differentials in the minds of white Americans affect attitudes toward the issues of equal opportunity and multiculturalism. The analysis suggests two basic conclusions.

First, white Americans, on average, tend to view racial minorities less positively than they do their own race; that is, the cognitive images they hold of minorities result in a more negative construct of these groups. Moreover, there is significant differentiation in attitudes toward different racial groups. Whites tended to exhibit smaller differentiation between themselves and Asian Americans as a group and larger differentiation between themselves and black Americans; attitudes toward Hispanic Americans fell between these two extremes. Given that racial groups are likely to be strongly constructed (i.e., the cognitive images used in the construction of these groups are firmly held and tend to be mutually reinforcing), change in these constructions is not likely to occur rapidly. Some possibility for such change, however, is evident in the views of younger respondents and those with more education. As younger cohorts enter the population and the level of education increases, the social construction differential of racial groups is likely to decrease among whites.

This ties in with our second conclusion. Decreasing the social construction differential between whites and other racial groups is important because these differentials are important determinants of group-based issue attitudes among whites. How whites perceive racial groups in relation to their own race has a strong impact in determining their attitudes toward particular issues associated with these groups. Those who perceived whites as being more "hard-working," "intelligent," and "peaceful" than racial minorities had less positive views of the issues of equal opportunity and multiculturalism. Racism is a function of negative group construction, which in turn lowers one's support for policies aimed at the negatively constructed group. Using this distinction, the general conclusions that can be reached are similar to those of Sears, Hensler, and Speer (1979); that is, lower support among whites for the minority group-based policy issues derive from negative views of minority groups (i.e., antiminority sentiment) relative to those of one's own race. This is true regardless of whether the issue involves the amelioration of differences at an individual level (such as with equal opportunity policies) or at a group level (such as with the effects of multiculturalism in the United States).

In sum, continuing shifts in the demographic makeup of the United States must be accompanied by social science research which addresses these changes and the effects they have on the political system and American society as a whole. To this effort, approaches that emphasize the importance of the social construction of groups can prove fruitful. Only by addressing the complexities of society and the perceptions of those who comprise it can we better understand racial attitudes and race-relations more generally.

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Appendix

Wording of questions used in creating the social construction scales and in the analysis of equal opportunity and multiculturalism:

Social Construction of Racial Groups

Now I have some questions about different groups in our society. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the characteristics of the people in a group can be rated. A score of 1 means that you think almost all of the people in that group tend to be "hard-working." A score of 7 means that almost all of the people in the group are "lazy." A score of 4 means that you think that most people in the group are not closer to one end or the other, and of course you may choose any number in between.

Where would you rate *whites* in general on this scale?

HARD-WORKING LAZY
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

UNINTELLIGENT INTELLIGENT
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

VIOLENT PEACEFUL
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Where would you rate *blacks* in general on this scale?

HARD-WORKING LAZY
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

UNINTELLIGENT INTELLIGENT
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

VIOLENT PEACEFUL
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Where would you rate *Asian Americans* in general on this scale?

HARD-WORKING LAZY
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

UNINTELLIGENT INTELLIGENT
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

VIOLENT PEACEFUL
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Where would you rate *Hispanic Americans* in general on this scale?

HARD-WORKING LAZY
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

UNINTELLIGENT INTELLIGENT
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

VIOLENT PEACEFUL
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Equal Opportunity

- Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.
- We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country.
- This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are.
- It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others.
- If people were treated more equally in this country we would have many fewer problems.
- One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.

1. AGREE STRONGLY
2. AGREE SOMEWHAT
3. NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE
4. DISAGREE SOMEWHAT
5. DISAGREE STRONGLY

Multiculturalism

Many different groups of people have come to the United States at different times in our history. In recent years the population of the United States has been changing to include many more people of Hispanic and Asian background. I'm going to read a list of things that people say may happen because of the growing number of Hispanic people in the United States. For each of these things, please say how likely it is to happen.

- How likely is it that the growing number of Hispanics will improve our culture with new ideas and customs?
- How likely is it to cause higher taxes due to more demands for public services?
- How likely is it to take jobs away from people already here?
- How likely is it that the growing number of Asians will improve our culture with new ideas and customs?

- How likely is it to cause higher taxes due to more demands for public services?
- How likely is it to take jobs away from people already here?

1. EXTREMELY LIKELY
2. VERY LIKELY
3. SOMEWHAT LIKELY
4. NOT AT ALL LIKELY

Region Variables

Regional variables are based upon the following:

Northeast	*Midwest*
Connecticut	Illinois
Delaware	Indiana
Maine	Iowa
Massachusetts	Kansas
New Hampshire	Michigan
New Jersey	Minnesota
New York	Missouri
Pennsylvania	Nebraska
Rhode Island	North Dakota
Vermont	Ohio
	South Dakota
South	Wisconsin
Alabama	
Arkansas	*West*
District of Columbia	Alaska
Florida	Arizona
Georgia	California
Kentucky	Colorado
Louisiana	Hawaii
Maryland	Idaho
Mississippi	Montana
North Carolina	Nevada
Oklahoma	New Mexico
South Carolina	Oregon
Tennessee	Utah
Texas	Washington
Virginia	Wyoming
West Virginia	

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